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Splitsville: "The Break-Up" Puts Chicago in the Spotlight

Vince Vaughn is a hometown boy made good. Vaughn, who was recently named ShoWest Comedy Star of the Year, grew up in Buffalo Grove, IL, and was class president at Lake Forest High School. When Vaughn made his second foray into producing with "The Break-Up," it seemed natural that the film would be made in recognizable Chicago locations including the Magnificent Mile and Wrigley Field.

The story follows a young couple, Brooke (Jennifer Aniston) and Gary (Vaughn), who meet at a ballgame at Wrigley. After a whirlwind year, they decide to split. The problem is that neither is willing to move out of their desirable condo. A war of the sexes ensues and edgy, quick-witted comedy flows from that conflict.

Peyton Reed ("Bring It On," "Down With Love") directed and Eric Alan Edwards ("My Own Private Idaho," "Even Cowgirls Get the Blues," "To Die For") was the cinematographer. "Vince and the writers' affection for Chicago [are] obvious in the script," says Edwards. "This film is very much about the dialogue as opposed to physical comedy. It kind of reminded me of a modern-day version of 'The Honeymooners.'"

Gary's job as a tour guide on a double-decker sightseeing bus that plies Michigan Avenue ensured that the film would showcase the city. Edwards says his local crewmembers were extremely well versed in filming the various sights.

"Our operator, Peter Rosenfeld, came from Los Angeles, but the rest of the crew, including camera assistant Peter Kuttner, key grip Art Bartels and gaffer Dick Oakes, were from Chicago," says Edwards. "They were all really top-notch, great people with a tremendous amount of experience. Chicago's filmmaking community is smaller and more tight-knit, so most of these guys have worked together many times."

Many of the locations have strict restrictions on filmmaking, and look their best at certain times of the day. Edwards depended on the Chicago crew to guide him through these obstacles. "For example, when we shot at Wrigley on a game day, we had to promise that the camera would not be more than 18 inches above the seat back," Edwards says. "That's what we were down to. We went into Wrigley with one bounce card and a seven-foot camera slider, but we got our shots."

Shooting on Michigan Avenue also had its restrictions and safety regulations. "The crews were all very safety-conscious and very good about presenting the issues," says Edwards. "They were ahead of the game and there were no surprises."

The majority of the film was produced over the course of five weeks on an elaborate condo set built by production designer Andrew Laws inside the Chicago Armory on the city's South Side. The condo set took up roughly one-third of the armory's massive space and the rest was filled with smaller sets. The floor plan of the condo set closely matched an actual apartment the filmmakers found on Belmont Avenue on the North Side of Chicago. They used the real apartment for some transition shots.

Edwards knew that the success of the film depended to a great extent on creating a convincing Chicago reality outside the windows of the condo set. He oversaw the construction of two 180-degree panoramic TransLites made from photos of the Chicago skyline, one for day scenes and one for nights. The photos for the TransLite were taken from the roof of the same building, three floors above the actual 14th floor apartment.

Edwards paid close attention to how the TransLites played in dailies, especially in the initial week. The filmmakers chose their dailies system carefully and tested a variety of digital projectors. Based on sharpness, color integrity and screen brightness, they chose a 4K Christie DLP projector. The projector, a 12-foot screen, and a D5 playback deck were housed at the armory during that segment of the shoot, so watching dailies was convenient for the entire crew.

"Projectionist James Bond was instrumental in tuning the system," says Edwards. "Colorist Michael Dunn was also an enormous help, profiling the film-to-tape transfer on a Spirit DataCine to match the film print dailies on a side-by-side projection system at Astro Lab. There was a lot of expensive hardware but our dailies were very close to a film look with the complete dynamic range, contrast and sharpness. That allowed us to make very accurate evaluations of the images. It meant a lot to Vince and the other actors to see their performances on a big screen with the cinematic feeling of brightness in a darkened room. It really makes the whole experience of creating the movie different."

The filmmakers chose to have their film processed at Astro in part because of time. "We really wanted to see things quickly," says Edwards. "We were on a short schedule, but more importantly it was for the actors. It was a response to the way Vince and this group of actors works together. Vince, Jon Favreau [and] John Michael Higgins all kind of bounce off of each other…It's very immediate and it has a short shelf life. So they needed feedback as soon as possible in order to know what was working for the character and what wasn't.

"When Vince came on the set, we really needed to be ready," Edwards continues. "You could see that it really affected his comedy if we had to change something. That makes things technically more difficult, but part of the cinematographer's job is to accommodate the actors, so we did.

"The Chicago Armory has an iron-trussed, barrel-vaulted ceiling that has a maximum height of 65 feet. Our rigging crew suspended a kind of mother grid from those iron trusses from which most of the lights, including the TransLites, were suspended. Some

fixtures were on trolleys that could be rolled in and out when needed. The TransLites were also mobile.

“It looked like the deck of an old sailing ship,” says Edwards. “It was an amazing setup that the rigging crew put together. It also reminded me of the old Lionel train set that every boy dreams of. It was the Cadillac of lighting rigs.”

The floor of the condo set was built about six feet above the armory’s floor. The TransLite was usually placed about 30 feet from the center of the living room of the condo set. Three sets of ceilings were on hand for each room – muslin ceilings, hard-split ceiling pieces and full ceiling pieces.

Each room in the condo set was equipped with two to four 4-by-6 Coops, which are lightboxes skirted with Duvateen and rigged with six 500-watt or 1000-watt photofloods, hung from the trusses. Light was controlled via a dimmer board.

For more specific lighting, Edwards used the entire range of tools, including Kino Flos, Nine Lights, Chimeras, and at least four types of diffusion. Light often came from an adjacent room, a practical, or through a window. The goal was realism.

Four trolleys riding on overhead I-Beams carried three 20K HMI fixtures each. These lamps stood in for the sun and could be raised and lowered, as well as shuttled back and forth to manipulate the angle and indicate the time of day.

“The system was quite versatile,” says Edwards. “You can get sunlight streaking in from an angle, off to the side, or bring it in from directly overhead and hitting the floor. You could create late afternoon light coming in low. That gave us great control and allowed us to change quickly. If there was any way for me to indicate time of day on this film, I did it. We had so much time in one location that we needed to avoid visual redundancy.”

Edwards used Panavision cameras and Primo lenses. He used three camera films depending on the situation: KODAK VISION2 100T 5212, KODAK VISION2 200T 5217, and KODAK VISION2 500T 5218. He used a correction filter for scenes shot in daylight.

“I always rate the 500 speed at about 400,” he says. “It’s funny, the way you educate your own eyes. My eye is used to lighting for 400. I know when the film is going to drop off, especially on a picture like this where we’re on the same set for so long. When you do stage work day in and day out, you get such an intense sensation of what the light does and where you’re setting the camera. In a way, you sort of have a more direct, visceral connection to how light falls on a subject.”

Edwards used a Milo motion control rig to create several shots. One particularly poetic shot indicates time passing in the condo. The Milo rig allows a shot to be programmed and repeated in an extremely accurate way, giving the cinematographer the ability to create interesting, unusual in-camera effects.

“When we were moving the TransLite, I noticed a random light effect that I thought was interesting,” says Edwards. “The light from the filament of a hard 5K lamp was coming through a piece of antique, hand-blown glass, creating a wonderful set of mottled shadows scraping the wall. I wanted to use that effect for a shot when the Milo passes through a wall and goes from a nighttime scene to a daytime scene. Dick (Oakes) placed a 5K on a scissor lift and then lowered the lamp hydraulically during the shot. It gave the effect of a sunrise.

“That shot was kind of an afterthought at the time but it turned out very nicely,” says Edwards. “Despite all the technical aspects of what we do, when everything is working, you let your instincts take over.”

Edwards put the finishing touches on his images during a digital intermediate session at EFILM in Los Angeles. “The Break-Up” is slated for June 2 release from Universal Pictures.